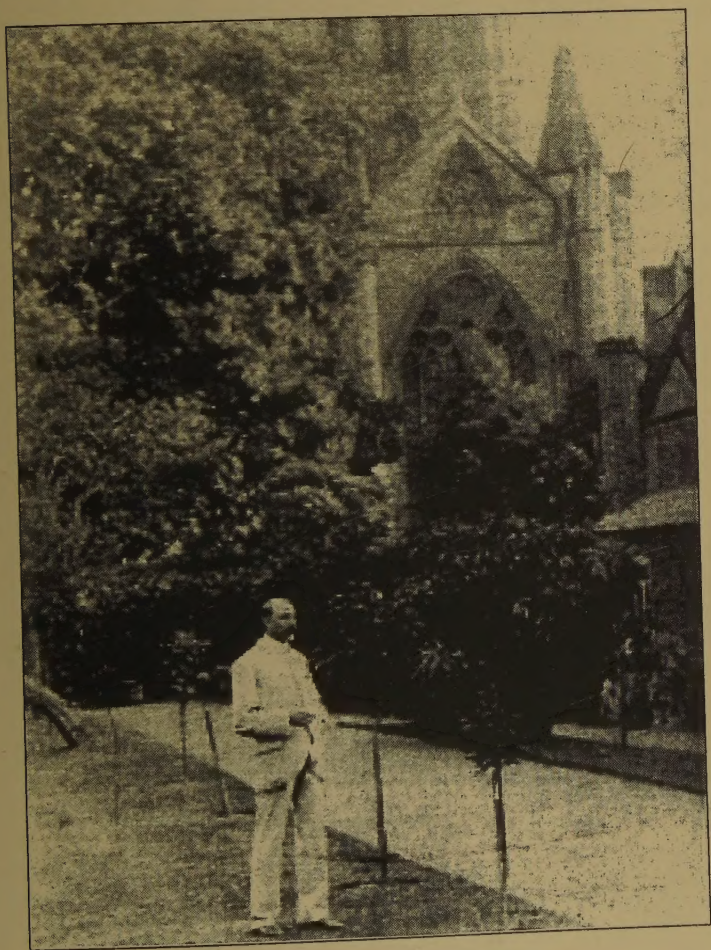


ELGAR

A Herefordshire Guide



Jacob O'Callaghan

**Elgar:
A Herefordshire
Guide**

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Front cover: The Cathedral Organist's garden, Church Street

Introduction and Allegretto

The aim of this booklet is primarily to guide the visitor to some of the spots in Herefordshire associated with Edward Elgar's music and life.

Elgar famously said that he only took the music from the air around him. The fact that the air was so often Herefordshire's, and that he so often resided here, in imagination as well as literally, should make Herefordians take as much pride in these associations as our neighbours rightly do. Worcester-born and bred, Elgar was by descent and, during his most creative period, by residence, a Herefordshire man. HEREFORD, AUGUST 1985

This little book was originally published partly as a reaction to an official "Elgar trail" that petered out west of the Malverns, and partly after finds made one magical summer afternoon, with Jim Bennett at the Birthplace museum. Happily the trail's historical revisionism was corrected; a little revenge was taken on me by devilishly signposting the extension in the opposite direction to my original suggestion; to which this edition now gracefully bows. Since appearing, this book and the original research behind it also helped prevent bulldog Dan's bones being desecrated by a shopping development in Church Street; and Plas Gwyn was Listed. There has been a local swelling of pride about Elgar's Hereford links. Dr Roy Massey recreated the GRS tradition when his own canine companion became a familiar sight around the Close, if not the podium; there are plans for an Elgar statue: a riverside carving of Dan has already appeared, only slightly marred by history rudely re-enacted, it being tossed into the Wye; this time Dan swam as far as Fownhope. Inevitably I owe some debt to clues in the memoirs of Elgar's friends and in his biographies, especially Michael Kennedy, Percy Young and Jerrold N. Moore, and in film Ken Russell, but many primary local sources were also used and much information which has never appeared before in the biographies, will be found. I gratefully acknowledge the practical help and encouragement given over the years by Lady Hull; Wulstan Atkins; Tony Hull (as well as their invaluable personal recollections of Elgar); also by Alan Webb; Alan Boon; Jack and Vivienne McKenzie; Martin Passande; Fred Druce; Nigel Heins; Anne Sandford; Vivians of Hereford; Canon W. O'Connor; Robin Hill and Martin Pavey of Hereford City Museum and Library; Godfrey Davies; and the staff at Herefordshire County Record Office and Worcestershire County Record Office; the Elgar Birthplace Trust and Elgar Society; and most of all I am indebted for the help and enthusiasm of the former Birthplace curator, Jim Bennett. Thanks to residents of Plas Gwyn, 20 Church Street and Handley Farm; to David Simms, Jeff Newsome and Patrick Cox; Mike Hazeldine; and also anyone whose copyright has been inadvertently infringed. Special thanks to Gill Baker.

HEREFORD, AUGUST 2003

All early photographs by courtesy of the Elgar Foundation except where indicated.



The composer with his daughter at Plas Gwyn, Hereford

We begin at the northern end of the Malvern Hills, at BIRCHWOOD LODGE, near Storridge, off the main Worcester-Hereford road, and just inside Herefordshire. A secluded former keeper's lodge on a northern spur of the Hills, with spectacular views over the Severn valley towards the distant Cotswolds, this was a summer cottage and hide-away for Elgar during the Malvern years before the move to Hereford. At that time the house was deep amongst woods.

It was equipped with a piano, and here Elgar worked on his cantata set in the Malvern Hills, *Caractacus*; the *Enigma Variations*; *Sea Pictures*; and *The Dream of Gerontius*, posting daily proofs off to Novello's in London and receiving



Birchwood Lodge

encouragement and friendly criticism by return post from his friend A.J. Jaegar.

On the score of *Gerontius* he wrote *In Birchwood. Summer* (he'd pay tribute like this to places in which he had found special inspiration). And he wrote to Jaegar:

The trees are singing my music – or have I sung theirs?

Rejoining the main Worcester – Hereford road at Storridge, turn right towards Hereford.

During a cycle-ride with Rosa Burley, friend and Principal of the Malvern girls' school where he taught violin, Elgar stopped to look at the church at Stretton Grandison, just off

the main road, and try the cider at the little inn. It was 1902 and two days before the crowning of Edward VII, for which he had written a *Coronation Ode*. He had used, at the King's suggestion, the tune from the existing *Pomp and Circumstance* march to which A.C. Benson had fitted some famous (and controversial) lyrics – *Land of Hope and Glory*.

But the landlady rushed in with the news that the Coronation was cancelled. It turned out the royal appendix had rebelled.

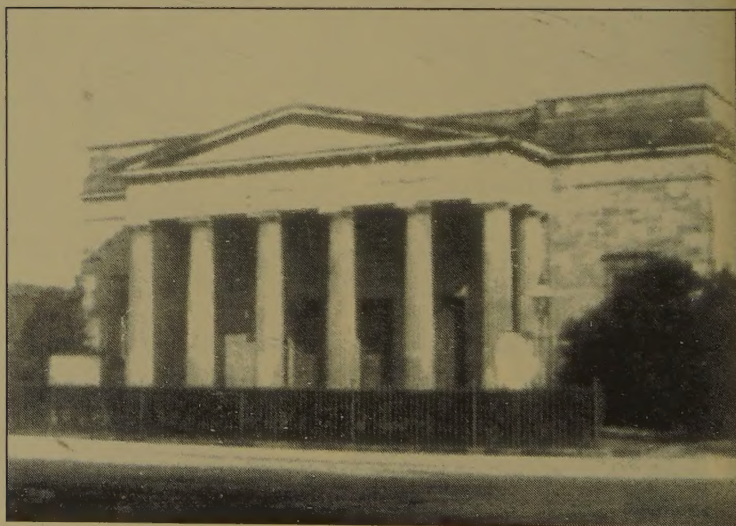
Elgar cheerfully ordered another pint of cider.

I don't care a tinker's damn! It gives me three blessed days in my own country...instead of stewing in town.

The ancient city of Hereford has so far largely avoided (by accident or design) the follies of redevelopment and high-rising which blighted parts of its fair sisters Worcester and Gloucester during the sixties and seventies. Its centre remains largely as Elgar would recognize it — a market town clustered around its riverside Norman cathedral, and fortunately — unlike Worcester — all of the sites associated with him remain, though this has in at least two cases been a near-run thing.

We begin at the Doric-columned SHIRE HALL (its architect Smirke is best-known for his British Museum).

Herefordshire
Shirehall



Completed in 1819, its fine Assembly Room was during the nineteenth century the venue for many orchestral concerts, and here rehearsals and performances of the Herefordshire Philharmonic Society took place.

Elgar's father and uncle had been members of this orchestra since the 1860s and in 1883 they were joined by Edward himself. He became leader in 1891, and here two years later it gave his *Spanish Serenade* its first performance.

Elgar gave his teacher friend Rosa Burley a ticket; but she had to sit in front of two ladies whose main preoccupation was not the struggling composer's music, but his presumption in marrying one of their own social circle.

They did not wish to cut Alice Roberts – though apparently a good many ... had done so – but they naturally felt that they could not be expected to meet a man whose father kept a wretched little shop in Worcester and even tuned their pianos. It was all most awkward.

However, most of the Hereford audience appreciated both the music and their dashing first violinist, over from Malvern for the rehearsals (later he took to cycling over to Hereford – though the combination of sun, fresh air and Herefordshire cider sometimes stopped him getting back).

Apart from the Herefordshire Philharmonic Society, the young Elgar helped to successfully resuscitate the Hereford Choral Society. A letter is kept in the City Library, in which he writes to its director Mr Heins that he agrees to play for half-price (but for one performance only).

An incident related in the *Hereford Times* during the 1903 Festival shows how Elgar, by then famous, retained a fellow-feeling for musician colleagues, however humble. As the composer was walking to the Shirehall he suddenly heard, from the old county gaol in Gaol Street, familiar strains. The Herefordshire Volunteers Band were playing *Pomp and Circumstance* for those unable to get tickets for the official Festival. The Times reporter attested that "...difficult and heavy as the task of learning it is, with its double sharps in the Bass Parts, the bandmaster and his deputy set themselves resolutely to conquer it".

And so they were no doubt astounded to see the composer himself appear to congratulate them. And to have diffident-

ly pointed out that there were just one or two places in the lower parts they had not got quite right yet...

In 1889 an energetic young Irishman, George Robertson Sinclair, was appointed Cathedral Organist, and so ex-officio Festival conductor. He and Elgar soon became friends, and Elgar began to be a regular visitor at his official residence at 20 CHURCH STREET.

This house is much more ancient than it appears, and contains what must once have been an important crown-posted mediaeval hall. It has a beautiful setting in a garden in the shadow of the Cathedral (see cover photograph) – and in fact was formerly part of the Close.

Sinclair, who, as we shall see, was to be immortalized in the eleventh Enigma Variation, was a remarkable man. Coming from the new cathedral at Truro, he was appointed at Hereford the day after his 26th birthday, and his energy and dedication to local music-making, extending far beyond the confines of the Close, became legendary.

He was a champion of both Bach and Wagner, having visited Bayreuth, and so at Church Street Elgar found – at a crucial time in his development as a composer – a discriminating and critical audience on which to try out ideas. He became a familiar visitor.

A portrait of the artist at Church Street was given by Percy Hull, Sinclair's assistant and successor.

Elgar was a strange mixture. His military bearing was a thin disguise for his extreme sensitiveness and shyness and when he came to consult Dr Sinclair over his compositions he was so nervous and excited that he could only with difficulty succeed in playing his own music.

... [when] the proof sheets of the piano duet arrangement of the Enigma Variations arrived and I was called to play them through with Elgar...he was in one of his most joyous and excitable moods. When we reached the end of the Troyte variation (no. 7) I apologized for misreading some of the very quick passages in the famous bass part. The immediate reply was "...It's the rhythm that matters – and didn't we make the old fellow buzz!"

It was in Dr Sinclair's house that Elgar wrote much of *The Apostles* and I remember seeing a notice on the study door, "Incubator is now warming up, hatching is on — please don't disturb the old hen."

His close associations with Sinclair influenced the Elgars' decision to move to Hereford in 1904.



Portrait of the artist with a young bulldog: in Sinclair's garden at 20 Church-St, Dan poses between GRS and EE; Percy Hull, his young assistant, stands behind GRS

The organist had an equally energetic young bulldog, Dan, who went everywhere with him – including rehearsals. He would sit under the podium (see drawing) while Sinclair conducted Choral rehearsals, and did not seem to mind being accidentally kicked – but he couldn't bear out-of-tune singing, at which he would growl menacingly. Once he had to be taken out because of some particularly flat tenors.

Elgar often returned to musical ideas sketched earlier. But perhaps the most bizarre example in his, and possibly anyone else's, career, involved the Visitors' Book of Sinclair's Church Street house. As well as recording the dates of his stays, Elgar took to sketching little musical portraits of the antics of Dan the bulldog – who obviously fascinated him (Elgar was a dog-lover but Alice was not). He dubbed them *The Moods of DAN (Illustrated)*.

This miniature Carnival of the Animal starts with the entry for June 5-7 1897, "He sleeps", and continues with December 18-20 "He capers", April 19-20 1898 "He muses (on the muzzling order)", October 29 – November 1 "Dan

Sinclair and Dan in action, drawn from the life by artist Brian Hatton while a schoolboy

Reproduced courtesy of Hereford Museums and Libraries



uneasy...fidgets...and...Barks (and this was the weekend after Elgar first thought of the idea for the *Enigma Variations*, in the course of which a famous canine tumble into the Wye also inspired Variation no.11 – of which more later).

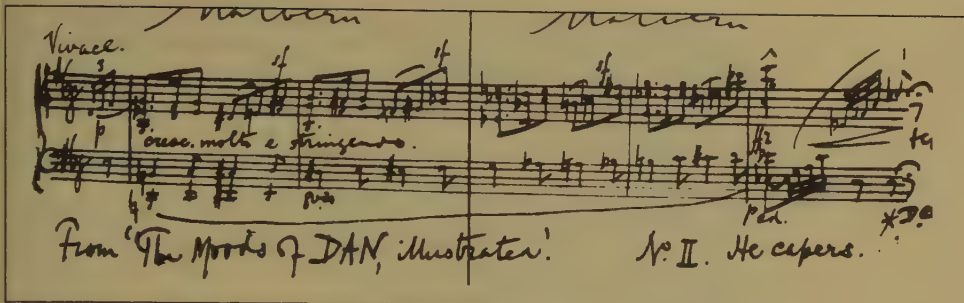
They continue during July 8-10 1899 "Dan triumphant (after a fight), July 11-13 1902 "Dan wistful (outside the Cathedral) and finally April 11-14 1903 "New Series. Retrospective. The Sinful Youth of Dan."

Yet some of these were destined to have a wider currency than the organist and his amused visitors. Part of Elgar's artistic skill was recognizing a good idea – and making the most of it. The idea of Dan's portraits prefigured those of the "friends pictured within". "Dan triumphant" turned up five years later as the stirring opening to the overture *In the South* (1904). Other themes were used in *The Spirit of England* and the projected oratorio to follow *The Kingdom*.

But the strangest transfiguration was to be that of no. III "He muses" into the "Prayer" leitmotiv which haunts *The Dream of Gerontius*. Indeed it develops, brass blazing and timpani thundering, into the impassioned climax of that great work's Prelude.

The book and sketches can be seen in the Cathedral Library.

And Dan? He lived fast and died (as bulldogs are wont to do) young, and was buried in Sinclair's garden in Church



Street, under an apple tree, his dates (inaccurately), and his resting place, marked by his sentimental master on a head-stone which is still there.

Hereford's massive Norman CATHEDRAL is, of course, linked to its comely sisters at Worcester and Gloucester by its turn, every three years, as the venue for the ancient Three Choirs Festival – oldest musical festival in Europe, and an important national event in the nineteenth century.

When Elgar was sixteen and working in a solicitor's office in Worcester, he drew up a "bill of costs" to his father: in an accurate parody of legal jargon he sets out his "charges" for services rendered (accompanying Elgar senior on a day's visit to Hereford, where William was engaged to play in a Shirehall concert, and back) betraying a Dickensian sense of humour – and a sense of style. Part of it reads:

Mr W H Elgar
To Edward William Elgar Dr.

April 17th Attending you, conferring as to the desirability of my accompanying you to Hereford on 18th inst., being the date of the Philharmonic concert, when (after discussing the matter at length) you stated that if I could make it convenient to attend, you would be prepared to proceed thither with me 6s8d

April 18th Attending you at your residence, conferring as to which train would be most desirable to go by, when (after some discussion on the point) you expressed an opinion that the train leaving Foregate St Station at 11.29 a.m. would be best . .6s8d

Attending you, accompanying you to the Station and also the Refreshment Room — conferring with you and Mr Henry Brookes as to the rival qualities of draught and bottled ale when we decided in favour of the latter 6s8d

Journey to Hereford conferring with you and fellow passengers as to the state of the weather and several other topics of general interest and advising 6s8d
 £1-6-8

.....B/f £1-6-8
 April 18th

Conferring with you as to the tunnel near Ledbury when you stated that you considered it the most offensive one on the line in which view I concurred 6s 8d

Attending you at Hewitt's Eating House conferring as to the desirability of your having pork, mutton, veal or other meat of which there was a great variety, when, as I and Mr Brookes had decided in favour of the first named, you took our view of the case and ordered 2 porks on the spot 6s 8d

Attending you (after we had dined) accompanying you to the Cathedral Green conferring as to the antiquity of a portion of the Cathedral, which you were of the opinion was of the later construction than the bulk of the building, and after a lengthy discussion (as we were not experienced in architecture) we thought it best to let the matter rest 6s 8d

Attending you to the Shire Hall where the concert was to take place conferring with the ticket taker as to the most desirable place for me to sit and giving the man in attendance instructions to furnish me with a Book of Words. Engaged 2 hours . . 13s 4d

Attending you to the Hereford Railway Station accompanying to your residence at Worcester and conferring on the business of the day and conferring as the desirability of your washing yourself to renovate your spirits and remove the depression which you stated had come over you and advising 10s 0d

In 1929, Elgar reminisced about the visit to the Cathedral which was the subject of his "Bill of Costs":

At this time of my life [he was sixteen] opportunities to hear orchestras were very few; I seized every chance that offered. This was an afternoon concert...excited over the music, the architecture of the cathedral and the day's outing generally, I was talking volubly to my father, who had played second fiddle in the orchestra...

Although the first church here was probably built for Putta, first Bishop, who arrived in 676, the present building,

replacing that burnt by the Welsh, was begun by the Norman Bishop Losinga (1079-1095). Elgar's father had been right: extensions were added in the style prevailing at the time, and a walk around will provide a view of the development of English architecture, from Norman (for instance the massive columns of the Nave), through Early English (the Ladye Chapel, with its exquisite lancet windows), Geometrical Decorated (north transept – see front cover photograph) to Perpendicular. The Tower, which still – thankfully – dominates the city skyline, was financed by pilgrims to the shrine of St Thomas Cantilupe.

Edward himself, as a violinist, soon joined his father and brother, Frank, in the Hereford Philharmonic Orchestra. And, as a composer, the appointment of George Sinclair to be Cathedral organist was to prove significant for him.

At the end of the nineteenth Century choral societies were in their heyday, and Sinclair, as ex-officio Three Choirs Festival Director, was an enterprising and innovative champion of new music in general, and Elgar's in particular. From 1897, when Elgar wrote Sinclair a *Te Deum* for that year's



Elgar and Shaw
in the Cathedral
Close

Festival, there would always be performances of his works, usually under his own baton, and he was a familiar figure around the city at Festival time.

There is a plaque to Sinclair inside the Cathedral – and if you look very carefully you will also find him outside, amongst the figures modeled in the rebuilt West Front of 1904-8.

In 1927 Elgar persuaded the Dean to let H.M.V. record a number of his works in the Cathedral by means of their new mobile recording vans. Unfortunately, the art of recording being then in its infancy, the chattering of two ladies, during a soft passage in *Gerontius*, can clearly be heard – shades of the Shire Hall concert – and since the Company had just provided the composer with their most up-to-date gramophone, you can imagine his fury.

Cross the Close, past the west end of the Cathedral, and the gateway to the Bishop's Palace, and descend Gwynne Street, named for Charles II's Nell, who was reputedly born here (according to the plaque, half-way up a wall, say Hereford wags). Walk down to Bridge Street, and cross the swirling river by the mediaeval WYE BRIDGE. At the equally ancient and charming Saracen's Head, turn left down the footpath and walk along the riverbank.

You are now near the site of the incident depicted in the eleventh Enigma Variation, "G.R.S." – for George Robertson Sinclair (a plaque and a quaint statue of Dan now mark the spot).

The weekend after beginning his *Variations on an Original Theme* – a series of musical portraits of his friends – in October 1898, Elgar stayed at Sinclair's, and one day they took the organist's bulldog for a walk beside the Wye (a new pedestrian bridge had been erected to celebrate the old Queen's Jubilee). Elgar described what happened:

The first few bars were suggested by Dr Sinclair's great bulldog (Dan, a well-known character) falling down a steep bank into the River Wye (first bar), his paddling up stream to find a landing place (2nd and 3rd bars) and his rejoicing bark on landing (the second half of the 5th bar) G.R.S. said, "Set that to music!" I did...

Elgar combined Dan's paddling and Sinclair's organ-pedalling (for which he was renowned) with the new "Enigma" theme. The result became no. 11 of the work which brought him fame. The deeply-felt theme, the confident,



highly-coloured orchestration all announced the arrival of a new voice in music.

Return via the Victoria bridge to the Cathedral Close – and cross Castle Green. It is all that remains of Hereford's once imposing Castle, built to consolidate the barrier of the Wye – up to medieval times more or less the frontier of English power: beyond was the warlike buffer kingdom of Archenfield, whose name is preserved as a Deanery.

The "Castle Pool" originally formed part of the moat. The hotel which overlooks it provided Elgar's time, as now, lubrication for Three Choirs throats.

HARLEY HOUSE is at the northeast corner of the Close. During the 1910 festival Elgar planned a party at Plas Gwyn, but his daughter Carice having caught scarlet fever, he held it here instead. He had a poster printed announcing the "Harleyford Musical Festival": concert direction was by "Pietro Bunni" (Carice's rabbit) and the programme included "Lecture on Tupsley Parish or Microbes I have met with some remarks on the Sewage Farm". One's nose can sometimes still meet microbes on Eign Hill, if the wind is blowing in the right direction ...



In Broad Street is ST FRANCIS XAVIER'S Catholic Church, built in the early nineteenth Century in serene classical style, though the interior is more Byzantine. Here Elgar used to attend Mass with his family, sometimes with little enthusiasm, for his faith was getting shaky.

Once his sensitivity was being strained by the elderly lady organist. He winced and writhed until he could endure it no longer. "That woman", he muttered, "has got one foot on the pedal and the other in the grave – I'm off to the Cathedral to hear some real music."

Across the road is the Museum and Public Library, where met (and still meets) the Woolhope Naturalists' Club which Elgar joined in 1905 – possibly introduced by his neighbour, Alfred Watkins, best-known today for his "ley-lines" theory. Elgar, it was said, knew the history of every inch of the County, and the Club's interests ranged from archæology to what would now be called ecology.

G. R. Sinclair and Percy Hull, the assistant organist, were already members of the Club by 1905, when Elgar and his young daughter, Carice, joined a large summer expedition to Symond's Yat in the Wye Valley. The party took a boat across the river, and were suitably awed by the prehistoric "Arthur's" cave in the woods. At tea they discussed plans to promote pioneering legislation for the protection of wild birds, a concern of the Club Elgar might well have endorsed, having by now developed, as he told a visiting journalist at Plas Gwyn, a horror of slaughter of wildlife for "sport".

Further on up Broad Street is the Green Dragon Hotel, where Alice would meet her friends while next door in the Herefordshire Club (now a shop) Edward discussed the latest developments in Form (that is, if the races were on).

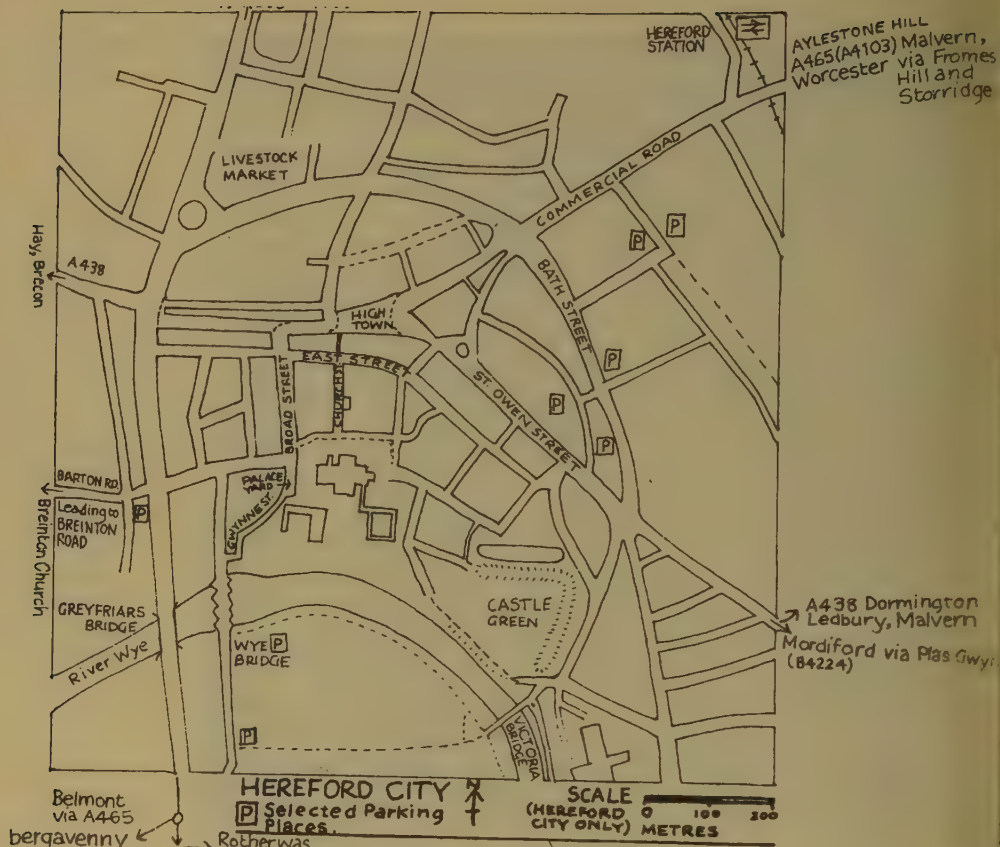
The friendship, in Elgar's later years, between the lifelong Tory and the Irish socialist playwright and music critic George Bernard Shaw was a great comfort, especially as it began to be fashionable in some circles to sneer at the Elgar-ian idiom. Shaw publicly defended the music, and privately encouraged the composer. In return the animal-loving Elgar supported Shaw's campaigns against vivisection, and the over-development of the countryside. An incident during a Hereford Three Choirs Festival (in which Elgar never failed to participate) illustrates how well Shaw had learned the trick of drawing the basically shy English composer out of the shell he would retreat into if an intimate subject — like music! — was directly broached.

Although after the death of Alice in 1920 the flow of masterpieces had dried up, Elgar in 1930 wrote a fine *Pomp and Circumstance* march — no. 5 — for Percy Hull, and the stirring *Severn Suite* for Shaw himself; was the old power returning?

G.B.S. hoped to get him interested in larger works again (the BBC had — at Shaw's suggestion — commissioned a Third Symphony). As they relaxed in the garden of a house near the Cathedral, which Elgar had rented for the 1933 Festival, THE PRIORY, Barton Road, he tried a ruse. It was the evening after a performance of *Elijah*.

The trouble, Shaw told Elgar, with old Mendelssohn was that he just couldn't orchestrate.

"Now, now, Shaw — I can't pass that," said Elgar immediately, and took a copy of the full score and spread it on his knees.



AYLESTONE HILL
 A465(A4103) Malvern,
 Worcester via Fromes
 Hill and
 Storrridge

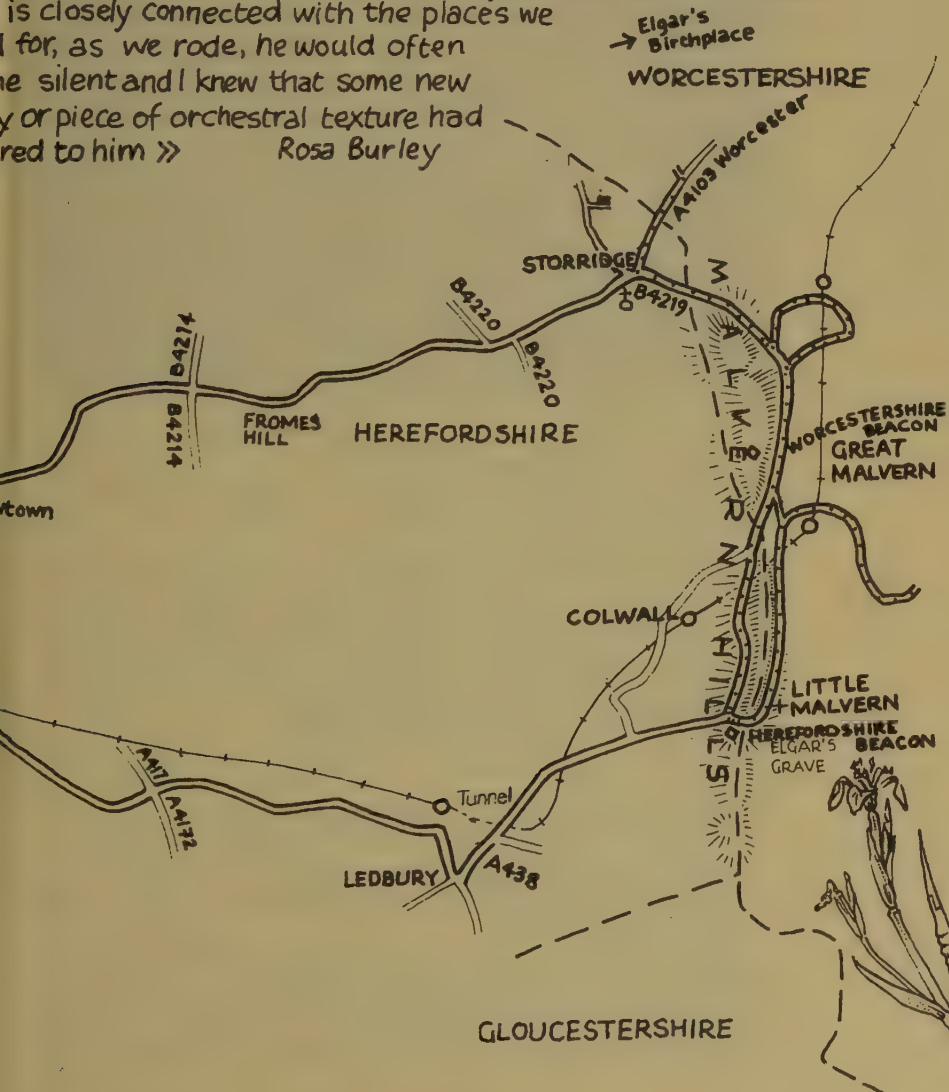


NOT
DRAWN
TO
SCALE
(Hereford and
Malvern are
about 20 miles
apart (32 km))

Herefordshire
Elgar Route
Worcestershire
Elgar Trail

cycled to Upton, to Tewkesbury, to Hereford,... to the lovely
s on the west side of the Hills - everywhere. Much of Edward's
is closely connected with the places we
l for, as we rode, he would often
he silent and I knew that some new
y or piece of orchestral texture had
red to him » Rosa Burley

→ Elgar's
Birchplace
WORCESTERSHIRE
Worcester



"There's a good
stroke ..." EE and
GBS discuss
Mendelssohn



"There's a good stroke," he exclaimed. "There's another. And my word, look here. D'ye see?"

And G.B.S. laughed as Elgar found page after page of contrary evidence to show him.

If anyone could have coaxed Elgar to complete another great work it was Shaw, but sadly the composer's appearance at the rostrum of the 1933 Hereford Festival was an audience's last glimpse of the great musician. Unknown to anyone, he had already contracted the illness which led to his death four months later in Worcester.

SOME OTHER HEREFORDSHIRE ASSOCIATIONS

There are, of course, many other places in Herefordshire associated with Elgar.

Elgar's letters describe the delight he himself took in exploring the rolling countryside by bicycle, and learning the history of its villages and churches. with anyone who would go with him. The indefatigable Sinclair was always game,

and even Elgar couldn't keep up with his furious bike-peddalling. Elgar's OS maps of Herefordshire marked in red with favourite bike routes survive in the Birthplace museum.

Sir John Oldcastle, the original of Shakespeare's and Elgar's Falstaff, came from an old Herefordshire family, becoming MP and sheriff for the shire. As Shakespeare admitted, the historical Sir John was no buffoon, but a Lollard martyr – and indeed once a friend of Monmouth-born Prince Hal – and Elgar's musical evocation, whilst following the play, reflects his essential dignity.

Follow Barton Road, then Breinton Road out of Hereford, past the waterworks, and look out for BREINTON CHURCH, next to Breinton Springs. The church is set back from the lane, and is easy to miss.

In the burial ground, between church and river, is the grave of Canon Gorton, a great friend and supporter of Elgar, who ran the Morecambe Festivals which Elgar often attended, and helped with some of the oratorios. The music inscribed on his gravestone is from *The Apostles* (the "fellowship theme").

Gorton became useful as a sort of diplomat between Elgar and the various Cathedral authorities. He eventually retired to Hereford, to a house near the Cathedral, but was drowned in the swollen river at the end of his garden under somewhat mysterious circumstances.

Besides St Francis', the Elgars also occasionally attended Mass at the Catholic Cathedral (now Abbey) at BELMONT, just off the Abergavenny road. Designed by Pugin in mature and impressive Gothic in stark contrast to St Francis Xavier's classical frontage (the Victorian "battle of the styles" certainly reached Herefordshire) the setting of Belmont and its monastic peacefulness much impressed Elgar.

Within walking distance from Plas Gwyn is HATTERAL, a fine large house in Folly Lane. Soon after Elgar's own move, Alfred Littleton, a friend of Elgar's and the chairman of Novello's, his publishers, moved here, and was often at Plas Gwyn to hear Elgar play through new work for him.

The village of Weston-under-Penyard lies on the road between Ross-on-Wye and Gloucester, in the south-east corner of the county.



In a remote farm near the hamlet of Pontshill, set high up on the green slopes which, though still within Herefordshire, were at the time well within the dense and mysterious Forest of Dean, was born in 1822 Elgar's mother, Ann – generally agreed to have been the most important influence on him besides his wife.

Her father, a farmworker, was tenant of a small barn beside the farmhouse and three or four acres of land. Later, either Ann or her son, perhaps still sensitive about the social snobbery which had sneered at the piano-tuner's son marrying a general's daughter, apparently fostered the impression – accepted by previous biographers – that Ann's father was a yeoman farmer. But the tithe map of the parish shows Joseph Greening as merely a "labourer".

Rosa Burley described how his wife – who hailed from Redmarley, Gloucestershire – actually only a few miles as the crow flies, but a social world away from Pontshill – was



made to suffer simply for the sin of marrying into "trade" (for she was instantly disinherited by her aunts).

Handley Farm,
Pontshill

Yet HANDLEY FARM would have been an idyllic home. As Ann walked down to school in the village, she would have seen the Herefordshire and Gloucestershire hills spread out before her and glimpse, on a clear morning, the distant Malverns glittering in the sun. And on weekends there was the thick Forest to explore.

In the farmhouse Ann grew up to love nature, books and poetry. Even when, as a young girl, she left Herefordshire for the city of Worcester where she was to be courted by and marry Mr William Elgar – an itinerant but prospering piano tuner and sometime musician from Kent – Ann retained a love for the countryside, and would have preferred her children brought up away from the Worcester city smuts. So the cottage at Broadheath where Edward was born was to be a re-creation of Ann's own childhood.

Edward's sister Lucy recalled how the children were encouraged to go out in all weathers during the whole of the year and how their mother could find solace out of doors. And in the pastoral serenity evoked in so many passages of

Elgar's music the influence of his mother, and her Wordsworthian belief in the healing powers of nature, lived on.

The Norman Parish Church at Weston, where Ann worshipped as a girl (for she was not a "cradle" Catholic), is well worth a visit. It has intriguing representations of Forest beasts on its columns, including a wild bear. Tales about these, and stories about the Forest (still very much a world of its own) would have enthralled her children; and a boisterous, wild bear and a captive, sad dancing bear are musically depicted in *The Wand of Youth*. Ann and Edward must have known that an unfortunate dancing bear had been notoriously done to death in the Forest, an incident later dramatized by local playwright Dennis Potter.

Let us return from these excursions back to Hereford city and St Owens Street where we find Hereford's Town Hall, home of the old Hereford City Council. Herefordshire county lives once again; the sacrificial victim demanded by officialdom being the ancient council.

Edward, his
daughter Carice
and Alice at Plas
Gwyn



In the year Elgar moved to Hereford he was being showered with honours – a knighthood, doctorates – and freedom of the city of Worcester. In Hereford Town Hall the burghers wondered how they could top this. They came up with an original, if bizarre solution. A deputation was despatched to Plas Gwyn, his new home, to offer their eminent new citizen the office and dignity of – Mayor of Hereford!

The Elgars were flattered, and Alice firmly hoped he would accept. However, the surreal prospect of his Worship Mayor Elgar, as a sort of rural Paderewski, conducting debates in the Town Hall on the municipal sewage works rather than the *Dream of Gerontius* in the Cathedral, filled Elgar's friends with alarm. So, alas, the sewage works had to make do with the rather more practical guidance of Edwyn Gurney, Elgar's grocer landlord and friend. Still, the composer appreciated the gesture, and wrote to the council:

I shall never forget the touching way in which the request that I should become Mayor of the city of my adoption was made ... thank you and the corporation of Hereford most heartily.

Plas Gwyn.
Elgar's study was
to the right
behind the veran-
dah





Elgar at work
in the study at
Plas Gwyn

Elgar reciprocated years later, in 1927, with a Civic Fanfare composed for the opening Mayoral Procession of that year's Festival.

St Owens Street, a stately Georgian thoroughfare, is on the way to the Elgars' Hereford home in Hampton Park Road. Continue up Eign Hill, overlooking a meander of the river Wye, and where leafy Vineyard Road meets breezy Hampton Park Road, you come to PLAS GWYN – “white” or “fair mansion” – home of Edward Elgar from 1904 to 1912.

If the Malvern years were the spring of Elgar's creative life, the Hereford years were his high summer. Although the renting of this mid-Victorian mansion from Edwyn Gurney, the local grocer and Mayor who had given it its Welsh name, was a heavy drain on finances, here Elgar – always a connoisseur of views – could look out (uninterruptedly then) over the silver river and rich Rotherwas meadows, across the foothills and valleys of the border country of Herefordshire, westwards to the final long, flat silhouette of the Black Mountains of Wales. It was an outlook to rival those he had left in Malvern. He would later suggest that these Hereford years were, apart from his childhood, some of his happiest



On the ground floor there was a spacious study with a balcony, and on a table in the middle, near the upright piano, Elgar worked on the masterpieces Alice foresaw would be written here. But the music came from outside, in the lanes, fields, meadows and river of his new homeland.

In a programme note to the first performance of his *Introduction and Allegro* of 1905, he described how he had heard its central air in distant singing while on holiday in west Wales. Then he had forgotten it until

a short time ago, when it was brought to my mind by hearing, far down our own valley of the Wye, a song...although there may be (and I hope there is) a Welsh feeling in the one theme..."All the waters in Wye cannot wash the Welsh blood out of its body" – the work is really a tribute to that sweet borderland where I have made my home.

This first, jubilant music to emerge here, with this central lilting Welsh air and what he called a "devil of a fugue", was indeed a homage to this still half-Celtic country, whose fresh air seems to breeze exhilaratingly through it.

Another view of the study: the table at which Elgar worked is on the left

In the "Ark", the chemistry seems to be right



"Dorabella" gives a fascinating account of visiting a composer working far into the small hours at Hampton Park Road:

"Hullo, you here? I'm busy."

"Yes," I said, "so I hear. I'm keeping the Lady company."

We went in and had our dinner. He never spoke. When he was not looking at his plate he looked straight in front of him with rather a tense expression...Half way through dessert he left the room...

Hours went by, but Lady Elgar and Dorabella stayed up keeping awake with coffee and tea.

While we were drinking our tea we heard the piano at last! The piano in the study was an upright and it stood against the wall with its back to the drawing-room fireplace, and the sound seemed to come down the chimney. As the house was all quiet we heard quite well and we just sat and listened, and forgot the time. It was really most wonderful hearing the scene as it grew, phrase by phrase [Elgar was working on *The Kingdom*] ... the music stopped. We heard the key turn.

"Hullo! You still up? And Dorabella too? And tea! Oh, my giddy aunt! This is good!"

An amusing result of sudden inspiration during the Plas Gwyn years was an incident depicted by Ken Russell in his famous television film *Elgar*. One of the composer's hobbies was chemistry: he is said to have designed and patented an apparatus used in Herefordshire's school labs; and he had rigged up a laboratory in a shed in the garden Elgar named "The Ark" (from its shape. It survives). One day, after dabbling with some chemicals, suddenly an idea called him back to the piano. He promptly forgot all about the experiment. His friend Billy Reed described what happened:

Just as he was getting on famously, writing in horn and trumpet parts, and mapping out wood-wind, a sudden and unexpected crash, as if all the percussion in all the orchestras of the world, shook the room...

Silence reigned for a few seconds. Then all the dogs in Herefordshire gave tongue; and all the doors and windows opened. After a moment's thought, Edward lit his pipe and strolled down to the date, andante tranquillo, as if nothing had happened...A neighbour, peeping out of his gate, called out, "Did you hear that noise, Sir? Sounded like an explosion!"

"Yes," said Sir Edward, "I heard it: what was it?"

While he was at Plas Gwyn, there were pets: turtle-doves and Peter, Carice's white rabbit, for whom Elgar built a hutch; a darkroom upstairs for photography; even a telephone; and visits (the station was handy and trains were frequent) from friends old and new, including Ivor Atkins, organist at Worcester and a friend since having been assistant to Sinclair at Hereford; "Variations" Dorabella, Nimrod, Troyte Griffith and of course, G.R.S himself. Oscar Wilde's young son, working at a city solicitor's, was invited for Sunday lunch. He noticed how Elgar carried around a music notebook, like Beethoven, on walks.

A mahogany dinner-table in the study was used as a writing-table.

I once watched him orchestrating something, the 24-stave music-paper held at the bottom by his left hand, the first finger at a bar on the lowest line, the right hand and pen running up to the top to do a passage for the flutes, coming down to put in something

Carice with Peter. As with Dan, Elgar became very fond of his daughter's pet: he became Elgar's "confidant & adviser, Pietro d'Alba" and was dedicatee of his part-song *Owls*



for the brass, lower for the harp, and below, a whole cascade of notes for the violins.

In an open window sang an Æolian harp, whose ethereal harmonics as the wind rose and fell fascinated Elgar (some hear them in his music).

In spite of absences abroad, and creative blanks (which were filled by the aforementioned hobbies: once Elgar tried to cycle to London, getting as far as Stratford), the Plas Gwyn years were the most productive of his life. Sketches from childhood and the years as the Powick asylum bandmaster were orchestrated as *The Wand of Youth*. He dedicated to Sinclair a fourth Pomp and Circumstance march, which remains almost as popular as the first. And, at last, came the two symphonies which cemented his reputation as the greatest English musician since the days of Handel and Purcell, worthy of the company of Beethoven and Brahms.

During work on the *Violin Concerto* of 1910, Elgar called on the help of Billy Reed, who had become leader of the LSO, and Reed described the scene of creative chaos in the study:

...music-paper all over the room, scraps at any vantage-point, many different versions of the same thing with the different bowings to be tried for each...while Sir Edward strode about the room, listening and rubbing his hands excitedly.

Carice, Elgar's teenage daughter, was joined at Plas Gwyn by her friend and cousin May Grafton, who took many of the photographs here. Carice attended Hereford High School for Girls. She recalled:

I used to dread Saturday mornings...I was not allowed to go into Hereford alone down St Owens Street because in those days there were so many drunk people about even at eight or nine in the morning.

By 1911, Lady Elgar felt his eminence dictated a triumphant return to residence in London. They could once more take on London – and banish the shadow of that first



Mordiford



stay. But as he prepared to leave Hereford the shadows in those Edwardian summer days were lengthening.

Already in the Second symphony the *nobilmente* tunes carry less conviction, and a quiet, slightly desperate nostalgia returns again and again.

The year after moving Elgar walked back alone to see the house, sadly noting it was shut up and there was to be no home that year for his friends the swallows.

The meadows across the river were commandeered for wartime munitions factories. During the 1970s Plas Gwyn, having been allowed to deteriorate, was only saved from possible destruction by the intervention of Ken Russell, who rushed to Hereford when he heard of the danger, and Wulstan Atkins, of the Elgar Foundation. Their efforts to purchase it and turn it into a museum failed, but it has survived (though an unsympathetic new house has been crammed into the back garden) and the exterior restored to its original Victorian grandeur. Now divided into flats and called "Elgar Court" it is still universally known by its former name. The present writer, and Wulstan Atkins, succeeded in at last persuading the Government of its importance and to protect it by national Listing, Grade II. The house is occasionally opened to visitors.

Leave Hereford via Hampton Court Road and head towards Mordiford via Hampton Bishop. If you are on foot you can retrace one of the composer's favourite walks, on a

beautiful but now sadly an increasingly built-up riverside path.

Mordiford, under the Woolhope hills, lies near the points where the Rivers Leadon, Lugg and Wye meet; a mediæval pack-horse bridge takes the road to Fownhope across the Lugg. In Celtic mythology the spot where waters meet is always very spiritual; the nearby church's tower used to bear a painted green dragon, after the legendary serpent which would travel from the woods down a lane still named after it to drink at the river.

This was – still is – a favoured spot for salmon and other fishing. Elgar would cycle from Plas Gwyn, or walk along the riverbank. The river and those mysterious, wooded hills close by combined in exerting their customary magic, and it became one of those special spots celebrated by being named on a manuscript (that of *The Music Makers*).

Follow the "Elgar Route" signs and pass through Dormington and Stoke Edith. Proceed through Ledbury, a pretty town where John Masefield's sister was pupil to not quite the most successful violin teacher ever ("I was terrified of him!" she recalled). Then head towards Malvern, rejoining the Worcestershire Elgar Route at British Camp.

The British Camp, also known as the Herefordshire Beacon, is an Iron Age hillfort whose massive earthworks give the hill a distinctive stepped outline visible for miles around. It was reputed to have been the last redoubt of the ancient British chieftain Caractacus and his Celtic guerilla armies in their desperate, doomed struggle against Claudius's invading legions. With its huge earthworks, it seems, like Hardy's Maiden Castle, a place heavy with legend.

A climb to the summit is rewarded with views of the Severn Valley to the east and south, and west across Herefordshire to the Welsh mountains, while northwards rear up the rest of the Malverns range.

A little way down from the summit, south towards Midsummer Hill, is a strange little cave hewn by prehistoric man into the granite hillside, and not far away is a standing stone associated with the druids.

In nearby Colwall, Elgar's mother spent a holiday in the Autumn of 1897, and one afternoon she and Edward and his wife, who were visiting, stood gazing up at the line of the Hills. She recalled in a letter to her daughter:

– The Beacon was in full view – I said Oh Ed! Look at the lovely old Hill. Can't we write some tale about it ... and asked Alice if she could get me any books of old Welsh history ...

Her son's imagination was fired as of old by this shared passion for romance. He turned to the traditions about the ancient British hero, and paced the paths along the hills to absorb their druidical atmosphere for his cantata *Caractacus*.

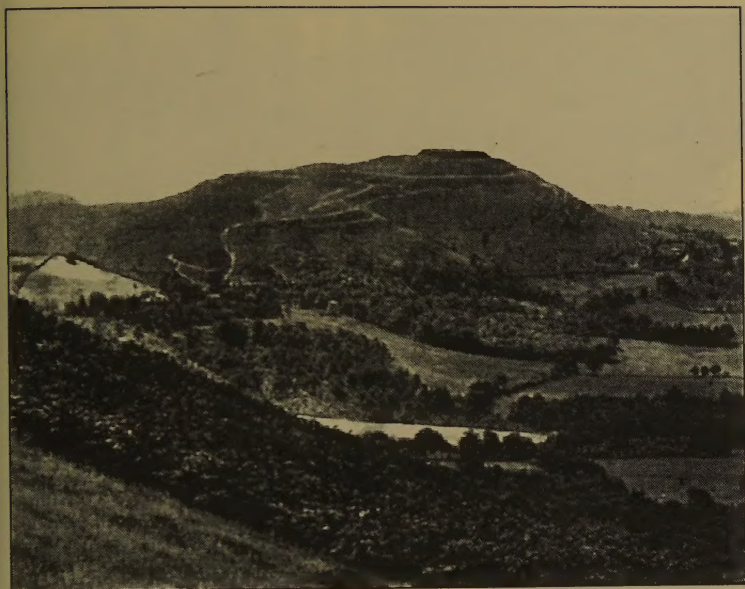
During the final weeks before dying in 1934 of an inoperable spinal tumour, lying in the bedroom of his house on Rainbow Hill, Worcester, with its view westwards towards the Malverns and Herefordshire, a comfort for the composer was to be able to play the new recording of *Caractacus* – he himself had actually directed the orchestra by means of a bedside microphone linked to London.

It was music that took the fading, dreaming mind back to the whispering woods at Storridge, and the Celtic fastness of the Herefordshire Beacon.

Edward Elgar lies buried, with his wife and daughter, a little way around the hill from the Camp, in the graveyard of St Wulstan's Catholic Church, Little Malvern.

The Malverns unite Herefordshire and Worcestershire, and are now forever associated with Elgar, who late in life would have himself driven round them, just as earlier he had walked or cycled – perhaps stopping to meditate at Birchwood, or to gaze out from Jubilee Drive. And he forecast to a friend during his last illness that his own spirit would join those of the heroes haunting these windswept hillpaths:

If ever you are walking on the Malvern Hills and hear this – [he whistled the haunting, wistful little tune from the *Cello Concerto*] – it's only me – don't be frightened.



British Camp,
Malvern Hills
(Alfred Watkins)
Reproduced courtesy of Hereford
Museums and
Libraries

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Friends reunited: Elgar and the three choirs cathedral organists, Ivor Atkins of Worcester, P.C. Hull of Hereford, and Herbert Summision of Gloucester, at the west front of Hereford Cathedral.

Photograph by Vivians of Hereford

HARLEYFORD MUSICAL FESTIVAL, 1909.

Grand Culminating Cataclysmic CONCERT & FIREWORK JERKATION

AT
HARLEY HOUSE, SEPT. 10th, 1909,

AT 8 P.M.

PROGRAMME (W.P.)

8-0. Tympanocrashic Detonation of a Brass Bombardon 'an Delian Heckelphone.

☞ Beware of Pick-pockets!

8-5. Overture - "I Diavoli dell'riosi" - Sans-sens (Op. 24A.)

ORCHESTRA.

Strings		MR. L. F. SCHUSTER
Wood Wind (the blooming lot)		SIR R. J. SOLOMON BLOAR
Trumpet		MR. C. A. TERRY
Precarious Horn		MRS. WORTHINGTON and MR. N. KILBURN
Parasucula		MRS. N. KILBURN
Principal Solo Bagpipe		A CHAIR
At the Piano		

Conductor: HERR DIETMANN.

8-20. Rhapsodie Ecossaise (unaccompanied) - Mac Havers
MRS. KILBURN.

8-30. Barley Water and Oat Cakes will be thrown to the Crowd.

8-45. Lecture on "Tupsley Parish: or, Microbes I have met. With some remarks on the Sewage Farm." By Plas Gwyn of that ilk.

9-30. Grand Concluding Firework Display, including magnificent Set-piece, "Mrs. Worthington Discovering the North Pole."

☞ See Small Handbills and Fergand. Beish!

☞ The Programme is liable to alteration or cancellation on any and every (or thereby) ground. If the evening is wet, Aquatic Sports will be wielded on the extensive sward. Costumes as hire. Gents' medium at sui-threat prices.

☞ By order of the Lord Chamberlains the Bomb-proof Curtain will make frequent descents.

☞ Tickets from Concert-Direction Pietro Bunal and the usual old gents.

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Son of a farm labourer's daughter from Herefordshire, Sir Edward Elgar, though usually associated with Worcester, composed many of his masterpieces in what he called "that sweet borderland".

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